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Making sense of sectarianism without sects: Quietist Salafi anti-Shia discourse in Jordan

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Salafis do not view Shias very favourably. In general, this has to do with their ideological objections to Shias' beliefs and, perhaps secondarily, the political conflicts with Shia powers like Iran, Syria and the Lebanese Hizballah (Haykel, 2010; Steinberg, 2009). Given the fact that Jordan has virtually no Shias, the kingdom may differ from other countries in that the sectarian issue is less urgent there. Yet Jordanian Salafis also use sectarianism to vilify other Sunnis in a competition for their own regime's favour.

This article shows that Jordanian Salafis contribute to the sectarianization of the kingdom with their own anti-Shiism by relying on a discourse in which anti-Shia ideological and political arguments and intra-Sunni polemics are inextricably mixed. It first deals with the Jordanian regime's stance on Shias and its relationship with Salafis. The article then analyses what some prominent Jordanian Salafi scholars have said about Shias and how they have used this to curry favour with the regime, at the expense of other Sunnis.

The Jordanian context

The regime's view of Shias

Views of Shias in Jordan were strongly influenced by the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Yet negative perceptions of Shias held by King Husayn (r. 1953–1999), who ruled Jordan at the time, seem to have emanated more from his opposition to the new Iranian regime than from anti-Shia feelings. In order to keep out Iranian influence, Jordan began promoting a 'moderate' and 'official' Islam (Robbins & Rubin, 2013). This was the reason several Islamic institutes were founded, including the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, established in 1980. This institute aims to bring together all Muslims – including Shias – and has also been used to counter the discourse of militant groups like al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State (IS) with a 'moderate' message, a campaign that especially King 'Abdallah II (r. 1999–) has been in the forefront of (Minzili, 2007).

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In this context, the Jordanian regime has also sought to propagate an inclusive view of who is Islamic. Aided by Muslim scholars from across the world, the ecumenical Amman Message was drawn up in 2004 and seeks to counter the practice of *takfir* (excommunication) among radical Islamists by explicitly including not only Sunnis within Islam, but also Shias of the Ja'fari and Zaydi schools (Amman Message, 2004). Such a regime-sponsored message clearly establishes boundaries Salafis have to respect in their own sectarian discourse.

Still, the regime's message implicitly excludes from Islam 'Alawis and others often lumped together in the category of 'extreme Shias' (*ghulat al-Shi'a*), thereby leaving room for Salafis to express their anti-Shia rhetoric. Moreover, like his father, King 'Abdallah II is critical of what may be called 'political Shiism' (i.e., political expressions by Shia powers), shares a regional concern about Iranian influence and openly warned against a 'Shia crescent' stretching from Iran to Lebanon (www.youtube.com/watch?v=08d_CYzqa-Y; Terhalle, 2007).

Salafism in Jordan

Salafis in Jordan form a community whose numbers most likely do not exceed the tens of thousands. Demographically, Salafism in Jordan is mostly – though certainly not entirely – Palestinian-Jordanian. With regard to public affairs, the community is dominated by quietists, who concentrate on 'purifying' Islamic tradition from religious innovations (*bida'*) and teaching the 'cleansed' result (*al-tasfiya wa-l-tarbiya*), but stay away from political activism. The country also has a community of Jihadi-Salafis, however, who believe Muslim countries are ruled by apostates (*murtaddun*) because they allegedly do not apply Islamic law (*shari'a*) in full and therefore deserve to be overthrown through jihad (Wagemakers, 2016a). Unlike Jihadi-Salafis, quietists actually make an effort to integrate their anti-Shia rhetoric in the broader discourse on Shiism promoted by the regime, which is why only the latter are dealt with here.

Although the regime has clearly stated that it distinguishes between different types of Salafis, it remains wary of the trend as a whole for its fundamentalist views (Wagemakers, 2016b, pp. 150–152). In order to show that they are not Jihadi-Salafis and, instead, are committed to Jordan's security and are loyal to the state, some quietist Salafis in Jordan, especially their leading scholar, 'Ali al-Halabi (b. 1960), have done their best to express obedience to the regime. As such, they view the condemnation of threats to Jordan as a way of showing that they can be relied upon (Wagemakers, 2016b, pp. 152–155).

Apart from doctrinal issues, quietist Salafis' obedience to the state is also what sets them apart from another important group of Muslims in the kingdom: the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, which has increasingly taken on the role of the country's most important political opposition over the past few decades (Schwedler, 2006). Unlike Salafis, however, the Muslim Brotherhood is generally not very interested in ideological details and, as such, is perhaps

less doctrinally anti-Shia. In fact, the movement as a whole was initially rather well-disposed towards the Iranian revolution in 1979, but became increasingly disenchanted with it when the members of the Muslim Brotherhood realized its distinctly Shia character (Matthee, 1986). As such, the organization in Jordan does not seem to be a real competitor to quietist Salafis with regard to sectarianism and will therefore also not be discussed here.

Shiism in the service of subservience

Ideological arguments

Relevant Jordanian quietist Salafi publications use the global Salafi anti-Shia rhetoric referred to earlier: Shias are often labelled ‘Rafida’ or ‘Rawafid’ (rejectors) for refusing to accept the first three caliphs, who Salafis revere, and are accused of believing in ‘corrupt doctrines’ (Ruhayli, 1999, p. 17). Another author, responding to an intra-faith conference seeking *rapprochement* between Sunnis and Shias, writes that ‘the Rafida have no intention whatsoever to make concessions in their doctrines and ideas’ (Al ‘Abd al-Latif, 1993, p. 45). Despite this, one Salafi states about Turkish Shias, ‘there are Sunni Islamic groups who cooperate with them’. This happens, the author says, because some Turkish Muslims ‘do not have sufficient knowledge of the truth of the Rawafid’ (Athari, 1994, p. 64).

Al-Halabi takes this point further by criticizing the Egyptian mufti ‘Ali Jum’a for claiming that Shias are Muslims and that ‘there is no difference between a Sunni and a Shia’ (Halabi, 2009c). Yet given the state’s ecumenical discourse, which also states that Shias are Muslims, and al-Halabi’s efforts to portray Salafism as loyal to and in sync with the state, such criticism seems odd. Does al-Halabi not implicitly contradict the Jordanian regime’s own views on Shias here? The matter becomes clearer when we see how Jordanian quietist Salafis contextualize their own views on Shias.

Political arguments

The ideological arguments Jordanian quietist Salafis use against Shias are often mixed with accusations of political Shia schemes against Sunnis. Iran, for instance, is described as a ‘Shia regime’ keen on ‘spreading their erroneous *da’wa* (missionary activity)’, which is supposedly aimed at ‘slandering the Sunni creed’ (Athari, 1994, p. 65). As such, Salafis tap into the regime’s rhetoric of viewing Iran and other political Shia forces as threats, but they do so primarily by portraying them as evil because of their Shiism (Halabi, 2013b).

Al-Halabi is nevertheless careful to point out that his views coincide with those of the regime and that the king himself has warned ‘against what [Shias] work hard for and agree on, [namely] establishing the evil “Shia

crescent"'. Although the king used the latter term most probably only in reference to political Shiism, Salafis nevertheless ride the waves of official anti-Shia rhetoric by inserting their own, more doctrinally motivated anti-Shia discourse into the regime's narrative on a 'Shia crescent'. The latter can be discerned in Iran, in Syria and in 'Hizbullah's despicable support for the unbelieving Nusayri army', referring to the 'Alawi ('Nusayri') sect to which Syrian President Bashar al-Asad belongs (Halabi, 2013a).

The Syrian regime is referred to in similar words by Muhammad b. Musa Al Nasr (1954–2017), a leading Jordanian quietist Salafi scholar, who labels it 'a Nusayri and Ba'thi regime' that 'slaughters the Sunnis' with the help of Iran and Hizballah (Al Nasr, 2012). Given that the Jordanian regime's view on who is a Muslim does not include 'Alawis, al-Halabi's statement that al-Asad is a 'Ba'thi, Nusayri, unbelieving' leader, 'who is not originally a Muslim (*ghayr al-Muslim aslan*)' may sound radical but is, in fact, perfectly in line with the Jordanian regime's discourse on this matter (Halabi, 2012, p. 23).

Shias as tools for quietists' own position

The anti-Shia rhetoric described above does not just build on a global sectarian discourse in the framework of a specifically Jordanian context, but also makes use of a securitization of the Shia that occurs elsewhere in the region, as well. It is perhaps not surprising that this happens in countries with significant Shia minorities, but this securitization also takes place in Egypt, which – like Jordan – is also overwhelmingly Sunni (Saleh & Kraetzschmar, 2015, pp. 545–555). Unlike the regime in Amman, however, the Egyptian state is not deeply committed to presenting itself as the face of 'moderate' Islam, perhaps resulting in an anti-Shia discourse that is harsher than the relatively mild version among Jordanian quietist Salafis. Moreover, Egyptian Salafis involved in this securitization – unlike the quietist Jordanian Salafis that this article deals with – are overwhelmingly political and try to present themselves as a purer, more authentic alternative to the country's Muslim Brotherhood (Saleh & Kraetzschmar, 2015, pp. 555–557).

The fact that Jordanian quietist Salafis do not compete with the local Muslim Brotherhood with regard to sectarianism, however, does not mean that they do not have their own intra-Sunni arguments. Al-Halabi, for example, is willing to use sectarian arguments to win an intra-Sunni competition over the regime's favour. As mentioned, quietist Salafis in Jordan have tried to express their loyalty to the regime and have painted themselves as the state's ideal Muslim allies to counter Jihadi-Salafis. As Sedgwick has shown (2015), various Arab regimes have also used Sunni Sufis for this purpose. Al-Halabi states, however, that Jordanian Sufis, unlike Salafis, have failed to assist King 'Abdallah II in countering radical Islamism (Halabi, 2009b, pp. 87–89).

This is relevant to Shiism because al-Halabi explicitly attempts to discredit Sufis by pointing to their supposed doctrinal ties with Shia forces that the Jordanian regime considers a political threat, such as Iran. He discerns a shared ideological basis between Sufis and Shias (Halabi, 2009a, pp. 37–53) and blames the latter for excommunicating Sunni Muslims. This not only makes Shias dangerous, but it also underlines al-Halabi's main point, namely that the Shia-related Sufis cannot be relied upon to act as proper partners of the Jordanian state (Halabi, 2009a, pp. 62–63).

Conclusion

Since al-Halabi blurs the lines between Shiism, which the regime – in its political forms – also opposes, and Sufism, which the state does accept, he seemingly credibly portrays Sufism as a danger to Jordanian security and can plausibly claim that quietist Salafis and the king are therefore allies in this regard. As such, al-Halabi uses Shiism to vilify Sufis as partners in the state's struggle with radical Islamism, indirectly employing them as a tool to serve his own interests, namely to underline quietist Salafis' loyalty to the Jordanian regime. Building on global anti-Shia discourse, quietist Salafis in the kingdom thus frame their sectarian narrative in such a way that in Sunni Jordan Shias are the problem and Salafis are the solution.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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